

Short Communication

Temperamental incompatibility in Anita Desai's novel *Cry the Peacock*

Rumita Sharma

Kumaun University, Nainital, India.

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The aim of this article is to reveal the temperamental incompatibility in Anita Desai's "Cry the Peacock" with reference to temperamental and emotional incompatibility between Maya and Gautama. Anita Desai presents the theme of marital dissonance resulting from lack of love, and incompatibility, emotional instability in this novel. This is the main reason for this novel. One of the greatest threats to a happy marriage is incompatibility. Both husband and wife have different attitude towards life. This attitude alienates them from each other. One of the main reasons for marital discord as depicted in the Indian novel in English Anita Desai's *Cry The Peacock* (1963), Maya and Gautama have strained relationship because of their psychic disintegration.

Key words: Anita Desai, Maya, Gautama, temperamental incompatibility, India,

INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai is one of the world famous and of India's best modern novelists in English. She is an Indian novelist, short story writer, screen writer and story writer. She is a writer who has influenced generations of writers. She has enriched Indian fictional world with her significant literary outputs. Anita Desai's chief concern is human relationship. Her central theme is the existential predicament of an individual which she projects through incompatible couple, very sensitive wife and ill-matched husband. She is mainly interested in the emotional world of women, and she reveals a rare imaginative awareness of various deeper forces at work and a profound understanding of feminine sensibility as well as psychology. She deals with the dislocation of normal life, recklessness of behaviour and morbidity of temperament, maladjustment in family life and such contradictions. Desai's novels are autobiographical, in the sense they mirror her 'quiet' temperament. Her novels exude the feeling of gentle isolation. In the words of atma ram, "whereas a man is concerned with action, experience and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation" (Desai interviewed',

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Cry the Peacock is Anita Desai first novel. This novel has been hailed by many critics as a significant achievement in the realm of Indian English fiction. Belliappa considers it as "a remarkable attempt to fuse fantasy with perpetual experience" (Belliappa, 1991). While Singh terms it as "a poetic novel" (Singh, 1977), Sharma considers it as "the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in English" (Sharma, 1981). This novel grapples with the theme of incompatibility and lack of understanding in marital life. Anita Desai has depicted the failure of marriage between Maya and Gautama. Maya marries Gautama who is quite senior in age to her but the two persons are entirely opposed to each other in their temperament and emotional responses. While Gautama is a practical man to the core, she is a highly sensitive and emotional type of a woman. She is neither able to get company from him nor physical, sexual satisfaction. What is uncommon in Indian women. She even takes initiative in love but Gautama's response to it is shockingly cold. Maya believes in life of total absorption and involvement. Gautama preaches to her

the need for detachment. It is on account of their temperamental differences that strolling together does not prove to be a delightful affair and conversation seems to be useless because they are unable to know each other and evolve areas of common interest for establishing meaningful relationship with each other. To quote Vinod Bhuhan Gulati, "The present and the past are juxtaposed to highlight the temperament incompatibility" (Gulati, 1984) between Maya and Gautama.

In the very beginning of the novel, Anita Desai exploits the occasion of the dog's death to unfold "Their singularities- the warm and cold blooded responses to the world about them and within and cold blooded responses to the world about them and within them" (Jamkhandi, 1981) with his detached outlook on life, Gautama telephones the public works department to send the scavenging truck to dispose of the corpse of Maya's pet. Maya and her husband Gautama react differently to Toto's death. One is emotional, the other is intellectual. He does not show any regard for the sentiments and emotions of his wife. Gautama asks her to make tea for him: "It is all over; come and drink your tea and stop crying. You must not cry" (Desai, 1980). Maya, who is in great shock at the death of Toto, despairs the detached attitude of Gautama. But when she comes to pour tea for him, it gets "split into the sugar-pot, the tea-stainer toppled into a cup, the lemons slipped to the floor and there was chaos" (Ibid). Later, when the servant comes in to announce that a visitor has come to see him, Gautama orders her to send tea to "his study forgetting her, forgetting her woes altogether" (Ibid). What disturbs Maya is not actually the death of Toto but the casual attitude of Gautama, for Toto represents for Maya everything which Gautama lacked. He was a symbol of warm, passionate, faithful, uncomplaining, unphilosophical creature and was intimately attached to her. He was a child-substitute for her. Thus Maya feels that he does not appreciate the emotional value of her desires and grief and as such finds the gulf between their relationship widening. There is no denying the fact that Maya herself is responsible for her alienation from him but certainly Gautama aggravates this loneliness by adopting indifferent attitude. Again in the very first chapter, when Gautama is working on his papers, he pays no heed to "either the soft willing body or the lovely wanting mind that waited near the bed" (Ibid). Her loneliness gets further externalized when she expresses her desire to release the encaged monkey and bears. There is no place for Maya in the world of Gautama. He neither understands her nor wishes her to enter his world. Thus, his world is totally strange to Maya: "On his part, understanding was scant, love was meagre" (Ibid). Maya, a childless woman and having no vocation to pursue, finds herself in utter suffocating loneliness. She always longs to be with her husband: "In his world there were vast areas in which he would never permit me, and he

could not understand that I could even wish to enter them" (Ibid).

Anita Desai presents another episode of incompatibility between Maya and Gautama when she expresses her desire to go to the south to see the Kathakali dance. "I want- I want. . . to see the Kathakali dance. I have heard of ballets they have in their villages. . . . and it is all out in the open, at night, by starlight- and perhaps they have torches. Yes, I suppose they dance by torch- light. . ." (Ibid). But Gautama looks at this curious proposal with suspicion and pushes aside her desire without caring much for the intensity of her desire. "I suggest you wait till a Kathakali troupe comes to give a performance in Delhi, as it is bound to sometime-perhaps in winter. It will be less expensive" (Ibid). There seems to be nothing in common in the couple who have been merely yoked together in their matrimonial bonds. As Madhusudan Prasad writes, "Maya and Gautama always had a disagreeing tiff with each other even over trifles. Although their marriage has been an utter fiasco, they continue to be together, leading an explosive life of incompatibility" (Desai, 1989).

The temperamental and emotional incompatibility is best revealed in Chapter IV of part ii when Maya finds Gautama away from her. "Nothing was hidden. All was revealed, and it was not what I hunted for. He was not on my side at all, but across a river, across a mountain, and would always remain so (Desai, 1980). The temperamental incompatibility keeps on mounting page after page till Anita Desai finds that Maya has started crying like a child bursting into a fit of furious pillow beating with the "patter of a child's laughter cascading up and down the scales of some new delight" (Ibid).

Lastly, Maya is unable to exchange the life of freedom with a life of loveless enchantment. Whereas Maya is caught up in a world of love, tenderness and flower, and Urdu poetry, Gautama is fully involved in the philosophy of detachment and neither tries to come out of his/her own shell. In short, the fatal distance between Gautama and Maya in *Cry The Peacock* (1963) arising from a temperamental incompatibility is the basic to the theme of psychic disintegration. The compatibility of these characters stands revealed as Meena Belliappa points out "Gautama who touches without feeling and Maya who feels without touching" (Desai, 1971). They fail to adjust themselves because they misjudge each other. According to Rao (1981), Anita Desai highlights the difference in the marital life through Gautama who represents "sense, reason and commitment to reality and Maya who stands for unbridled individualism, an indulgent subjectivity, and a compulsive desire to retreat from the world of harsh reality into a world of make-believe" (Srivastava, 1984).

She seems to suggest that the husband and wife are being crushed under the influence of changing trends of society. The husband considers his wife wants freedom and independence of thought. In the end, to quote R.S

Sharma, "the novel becomes a fascinating psychological study of neurotic fears and anxieties caused by marital incompatibility and disharmony and compounded by age-old superstition" (Desai, 1981).

Conclusion

In sum, the key to understanding the novel becomes a fascinating psychological study of neurotic fears and anxieties caused by temperamental incompatibility. The novelist presents temperamental incompatibility of husband-wife relationship. The two widely different individuals, Maya and Gautama were united in marriage as such, they are unable to lead a harmonious and purposeful domestic life. Marital dissonance is definitely a reality, a painful disturbing fact of conjugal life. Anita Desai deserves admiration for such a deep insight into the nature of male-female behaviour.

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